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OPINION

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Notebook

Empowering the people

Kerry Curry

Dallas-based Southwest Airlines is a model company in many ways, perhaps most notably for its employee-centric philosophy.

It's not unusual to hear CEOs say they admire and model their own companies after the airline and its gregarious founder Herb Kelleher.

But what they might not know is that Southwest can be a model on the political front as well.

With the presidential campaign in full swing, we've all heard about the importance of grassroots support. Southwest has it. Some of the presidential candidates do not.

The low-cost airline operates an efficient and effective political machine within its nationwide 34,000-employee base.

Southwest's grassroots' network pummeled lawmakers with 13,000 letters in 2002 when the war-risk insurance issue threatened its business. That's just one example of how an effective legislative program can effect positive change for a corporation.

Airlines are regulated to an extraordinary degree, so it's easy to see how Southwest is acutely affected by what happens in the local, state and national political arenas.

But other companies can benefit from becoming politically involved as well, says Amy Showalter, president of The Showalter Group in Cincinnati.

"Any company that has any government impact on their business -- opportunities for the government to give or to take away" -- are ripe for forming legislative-awareness programs, she said. "We find that legislators are influenced by constituents, and employees of a company are constituents. Often it takes a 'regular person' to be the most effective messenger for a legislator."

In 1996, the airline formed a legislative-awareness department to help employees get involved in political and community activities and ensure that Southwest's viewpoint gets heard on issues that affect it and its customers, says Susan Goodman.

Goodman oversees the five-employee department and has tapped Showalter's expertise to train employees to become effective political communicators.

The program has three moving parts.

The first is a key-contact program in which employees develop a one-on-one relationship with their Congressman by attending town-hall meetings, visiting the lawmaker and sending occasional notes. That way, when an issue arises, the person won't be a stranger coming forward with a cause. About 160 employees are key contacts.

The second part is the ambassador program -- community involvement in activities that are both good for the community and

good for Southwest politically. About 120 employees participate as ambassadors.

The third segment, called the action network, is the grassroots element -- 325 point people who help Southwest get its message to lawmakers.

The grassroots element played a key role when the war-risk issue raised its ugly head after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Before 9/11, Southwest had paid \$733,000 per year for what effectively was terrorism or war insurance. After 9/11 the insurance skyrocketed to \$100 million per year -- far too expensive, in Southwest's view.

A Southwest lobbyist worked to get wording into a bill that would require the government to underwrite terrorism insurance. Then Southwest employees blitzed legislators over a two-week period to get the measure passed. Thousands of personal letters poured in to Congressmen -- none of them form letters. The measure was passed in the Homeland Security Act.

Successful legislative-awareness programs require time and resources. Employees need to be educated and motivated to support their company's cause.

Southwest has perfected the craft. Other businesses -- and perhaps a few presidential candidates -- could learn a lot from its example.

Curry is managing editor of the Dallas Business Journal.

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